

Two Birds

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It's not easy growing up in a town like Derry with the weight of a destiny strung 'round your neck.

Two Birds

They had to walk to kindergarten together by simple virtue of being neighbors. ("Hold hands at crosswalks and always look both ways before crossing the street!")

The dark-haired boy, with his wild laugh and his perpetually-scraped knees, always forgot those simple rules. It was the solemn-faced boy with his hazel eyes everbright, noticing all, who dove for him, day after day, to snatch his wrist and haul him back to sidewalk-safety.

"We're s'posed to wait," he'd insist, glaring, as the other boy smiled good-naturedly.

"Oh yeah; I forgot."

Richie's mind worked a thousand miles a minute; his ever-chattering mouth could hardly keep up with it. He tripped his words up and sounded a lot like Yoda from Star Wars.

"He's an imaginative boy," Mrs. Tozier would dismiss when he got in trouble at school. "He has so much energy. We're hoping Stanley will be a good influence on him."

"Stanley," Mrs. Uris said, time and time again with a knowing little smile. "Is a good influence on *everyone*."

He certainly tried to be. He colored in the lines. He ate his snacks in their little portioned containers at only the appointed time, and not a moment sooner. He never twisted the chains on the swingset to make himself spin. His library books were returned on time; his bed always neatly made. He never had to be reminded not to get his clothes dirty, and not once for the entire school year was he scolded for talking in class.

"Such a serious boy," his teacher praised him, time and time again. "A fine little man."

(Sometimes, though, *sometimes* Stanley would watch the other kids running and playing and shouting wildly without a care in the world,

with Richie always leading the charge. At times like that, he couldn't help but feel wistful for something he would never have, could never be.)

"I'm *always* nice to Mrs. Rowell," Stan told his mother during an after-school snack.

"I'm not," Richie supplied cheerfully. "She says I'm a pest. But she likes me anyway."

(And it was true, wasn't it? Somehow, inexplicably, everyone always did.)

First grade was an avalanche of new faces and experiences, and Richie drank it all in like a man dying of thirst. People! Toys! Work! Play! All of it was so *exciting!*

He wanted to run, run, *run* to school every day, but was always held back by Stanley, stubborn as a bull.

"Why don't you *wait* for me, Richie?!" Stanley hauled him back as he raced into the street, and both boys were shocked into silence when a truck sped 'round the corner, right where Richie would have been standing had the other boy not intervened. It didn't slow once. "Don't you see? Can't you take it a little slower?"

Richie didn't know if he could. Even when he told his feet to slow down, they wouldn't listen to him.

"Can't you go faster?!" he'd tug on Stanley's arm. "Come on, Stanley, I want to *show* you something!"

(The world was full of somethings. 'Stanley, Stanley, look at this bug! Have you ever seen a bug like that in all your life?!" "Boy; I guess I haven't. I wonder what kind it is?")

Richie was the one who found the bugs (the birds, the leaves, the deer, the snails, the rocks, the hidden places). Stanley was the one who looked them up in his Beginners Encyclopedia, who pointed to their pictures and told Richie exactly when, where, what, and how they were, categorizing and explaining the world but never once

making it any less magical.

"Wow," Richie said, at least a thousand times a day. "Wow!"

Stan couldn't pinpoint the exact moment he noticed something off with Richie. Sure, he bumped into walls a lot, but that was just because he never looked where he was going. And maybe he had to squint a little, lean too close to books to make out their words, but surely there was an explanation for that, too?

He swerved badly sometimes when riding his bicycle though. (Stan hadn't been allowed a bicycle. "Not until you're eight, son.") One time he wiped out over the edge of the sidewalk and into the road (it's always roads with you) and sprawled, dumbfounded, on his side as droplets of blood began to seep through his shirt.

"Oh, no—" Stan's hands fluttered like small white birds as he dropped his things and knelt by Richie's side, trying to pull the bike off of him, trying to see the damage. He'd never seen Richie *cry* before.

(Stan used to cry all the time. He cried when his peas touched his carrots, or if his mother tried to drag him out of the house before he could tap the doorknob four times- four, always four; magic number four. He cried when the cobblestones were too small for him to avoid stepping on cracks... And then the doctor started giving him pills so he didn't have to cry so much anymore.)

"I didn't see it," Richie sniffled. Stan's stomach flipped sickly when he saw the shredded sleeve of Richie's shirt, how tiny pebbles imbedded themselves in his dripping skin. "I didn't see the edge of the sidewalk." (It took peroxide and band-aids and tweezers to set everything to rights again.)

Richie showed up to school the next day in glasses, and for a moment, all was right with the world again. Such a simple solution, after all, like Stan's pills had been for him. He'd never have to see Richie cry again now that he had those: all was as it should be.

Then the teasing started. Comments like 'four-eyes' could be brushed off; jokes about how many fingers kids were holding up- that was

relatively harmless.

Then something in the air turned sour, as was wont to happen in Derry.

No longer were bumps in the hallway playful. They were more like pushes- and it wasn't just second graders doing the pushing. It seemed that by daring to be different, Richie invited the attentions of much older kids, too; and the constant running of his smart mouth didn't help matters.

"You're dead, Tozier," snarled fifth-grader Henry Bowers, who'd already been held back twice, when Richie called him the 'son of a motherless whore' (something he'd heard on television and thought sounded pretty impressive) for grinding his face into the school bricks. "You and your Jew friend."

"D-d-d-don't w-worry about it," said Stuttering Bill, one of their classmates, approaching with his little asthmatic friend Eddie. "Huh-he is always p-p-picking on us."

"Yeah," said Eddie, nodding. "I guess we're just losers, huh? But at least we can be losers together."

By third grade, the topic of Stanley's family's religion had been brought up a *lot*.

"What's so bad about being a Jew?" Richie asked his father one night, tugging on the edge of his newspaper until he lowered it and looked at his only son.

Wentworth Tozier only blinked. "Why, nothing is, son," he said slowly. "What's brought that into your head?"

"The big kids at school are always callin' Stan that," Richie said, making himself comfortable on his father's lap, although he was getting too big for it. "I told 'em I was Methodist; maybe they should beat on me for *that* for a change. They only laughed at me and kept picking on Stanley, so I had to punch one of 'em."

Wentworth lifted his son's predominant hand and examined it. Sure

enough, the knuckles were bruised from slamming into a taller kid's jaw. As a father, he exuded disapproval. As a human being, he felt a small sunclap of pride.

"Son, we don't hit," he said.

"They were hitting first." Richie took his hand back, folded his arms, glared sternly behind the thick frames of his glasses with childlike certainty and glowering righteousness. *"They were wrong first. I'm not sorry. It's Stan, dad; don't you get it?"*

Wentworth 'got it.'

"Son, don't tell your mother I told you this... but you're right. There's right and there's wrong in this world, and people get them mixed up a lot. You said people hate Stanley because he's a Jew?"

"Yes, dad."

"The world is full of people who hate what's different."

Richie nodded. He *knew* that. He saw it every day at school. It didn't matter what made you different- people would attack you for it just the same. Losers the world wide always got the short end of the stick.

"Mrs. Kaspbrak said Eddie can't lend Stan any money; that Jews never pay it back."

"Is that true, son?"

"No way! Stan *always* pays back, right away! Even when everyone else forgets to do it, he still remembers."

"Then Mrs. Kaspbrak is wrong, isn't she? I daresay, she's wrong about quite a lot of things."

Richie bit his lip, nodded. This conversation felt forbidden; saying that grown-ups could be just as wrong as kids. But it also felt *important*.

"Do you love Stanley, son?"

"You bet I do!" Richie's eyes were wide in earnestness. "He's my *best friend!*"

"Then you'd best be there for him, hmm?"

This sounded almost like permission to continue what he was doing. Richie was again struck with a sense of responsibility that felt very adult. He wasn't going to be punished for fighting, then?

Before he could ask for clarification, Wentworth gently slid him off his lap and raised the newspaper back to his face, signalling the end of the conversation.

Two months later, Henry Bowers pinned Stanley down on the school steps, muddy knees staining his pristine Cub Scouts uniform, roaring hatred in his ear and scrubbing his face raw with handfuls of snow until the tiny crystals gouged his skin raw and bloody. Richie didn't hesitate to throw himself into the fray, catching Henry by the ears and pulling as hard as he could. Henry roared like a caged beast, shaking Richie off so hard that he *flew*-

He woke up (seconds? Minutes?) later, with ice-cold hands cupping his cheeks and Stanley shouting something he couldn't hear through the ringing in his ears. He squinted, tried to focus (he'd apparently hit his head quite hard against the stone steps.)

Around Stan's shoulder, he saw Coach Black pulling a flailing and screaming Bill off of Henry Bowers, scolding all the boys with great irritation.

"Your eyes are just like caramel apples," he observed, delighted; never before had he noticed how perfectly the light brown ringed deep apple-green.

"What?!" Stanley asked, flabbergasted, and then Richie was slipping under once more.

(He was invited to a Hanukkah party several weeks later with Stan's family. He danced energetically to the lively music and chatted happily with all of Stan's aunts and uncles and ate sufganiyot until his belly extended past his belt and powdered sugar coated his chin.

He'd never before seen Stanley smile so brightly, and mentally vowed to earn that smile as often as he was able.)

Fourth grade brought with it a subtle shift in pack dynamics. No longer could they hold hands on the way to school- that was *gay*. (This, they learned from the jeers of many, many students. Sometimes adults, too.)

Perhaps it was the topic of what it meant to be '*gay*' that spurred a bizarre sort of awakening in Richie. All of a sudden, *everything* was '*boner*' this and '*make-out*' that. Every girl in equal or older years was rated on a scale of attractiveness. He didn't touch his friends like he used to- no more squeezes around the shoulders, or cupping of faces: for almost a whole year, they were physically off-limits. He simply sat with his hands in his pockets and a grin on his face.

"She's a five, but those tits makes her an *eight*, amiright Stan-the-Man?!" Richie exclaimed, miming a bouncing weight on his own chest as he walked along. He was referring, of course, to his newest '*girlfriend*'- a girl he'd flirt with ceaselessly until she either kicked his ass or agreed to go to the movies with him. (Sometimes the girls would kiss him. More often than not, they wouldn't.)

This new phase of Richie's annoyed Stan endlessly. He waited for it to pass (it wasn't just him. It annoyed Bill and Eddie too... but it didn't seem to annoy them as *much*.)

"Guh-girls are p-p-people, too, Ruh-Richie," Stuttering Bill told him one day at lunch. "Yuh-you t-t-talk about th-them like they're..."

(Pieces of meat, and you're a starving wolf.)

Maybe a scolding from Big Bill was what ended the phase. (Everyone felt a little ashamed when Big Bill scolded them. He just had a way about him. Like a parent wearing a kid's body.) Regardless, Stan was relieved when Richie toned it back a little.

("*Aren't you even a little curious about that stuff at all, though?*" Richie once asked him, when it was just the two of them. (He was always more subdued when they were alone.) "*Kissing, and sex... You act like*

you just don't even care."

"*I don't,*" Stan replied. It was almost the truth.)

Fifth grade was like a dream. Henry Bowers and his friends had at last moved on to middle school - passed along by teachers tired of seeing their faces repeat year after year.

The Losers Club sailed through the months relatively unscathed. Being eleven years old was wonderful. Being eleven meant that they were allowed to ride their bikes unsupervised after dark; that they could swim in the quarry together, could play in the Barrens all weekend long if they wanted.

Bill grew the fastest of all of them. Eddie hardly ever seemed to grow at all- he could still wear the same clothes he'd been wearing for years.

Stan graduated from Cub Scouts to Boy Scouts and taught his friends all the interesting things he'd learned.

(How to build fires; how to tie the best knots; how to set up tents...)

Richie relaxed his no-touching stance that summer; he was as affectionate as a wild, half-grown coyote pup, clumsy on paws too big for his body. He knocked into his friends, bowlled them over, snuffled in their ears. Once he licked a long stripe up the side of Stan's face and cackled like a madman when Stan pushed him into the river in retribution.

If Richie was a pup, then Stan was a fussy, aging housecat. He liked his naps in the sun (his growing bones ached when they weren't warm) and many quiet hours spent birdwatching.

Sometimes- and these were the best moments- Richie would come to him, still dripping from the lake, and curl at his side. Stan would point out the birds he saw; tell Richie the scientific name for them; explain where they'd migrated from, and whether they would leave in Autumn.

Richie listened attentively, his pointy chin digging into Stan's soft

belly, and Stan would feign irritation as his shaggy dark hair seeped riverwater into his shirt. (Usually, though, he just scratched Richie behind the ears, and Richie kicked his foot, pretending to be a sleepy old hound-dog.)

Sometimes Stanley nervously wondered what other kids from school would say if they saw them like this.

He tried not to think about it.

Sixth grade was on and Richie Tozier was back with a bang, baby!

His grades were good; his conduct, poor. He spent more time in the principal's office than his parents thought he probably ought to.

("If you'd just learn to control your *mouth*, Richie... Do you have to sass everyone all the time?" "And the *swearing*; where did you learn that kind of language?!"")

"School doesn't really matter anyway," he declared to an awed-looking Eddie. "Since I'm gonna be a rock star."

"But you can't *sing*!"

"Fine, then. A radio DJ."

Stan, though. Stan, he could not fool, or shock, or charm. Stan only looked at him with those ever-Autumnal eyes and saw right through him, through his jokes and bravado and whatever squishy things he tried to keep hidden, right to the very heart of him.

"You don't fool me," Stan said. "You care about school. Why else do you study so hard?"

"Stan, Stan, Stan-the-man, never once played Kick the Can; but this one truth he cannot ban: for rock music, he too does fan."

They did often end up sitting on Richie's bed, heads together, bobbing and humming with Richie's little radio. Bon Jovi; Queen; Duran Duran; AC/DC; Guns n' Roses... anything and everything and all.

Bill would listen, too, and Eddie, but they didn't *get* it, not really, not like Stan did. Richie thought that if he put a stethoscope to his own chest and really listened, his heart would probably synch up to the baseline of 'Welcome to the Jungle.'

He tapped the rhythm out on Stan's ribs one night while the other boy was reading comics. He idly sang in his dry voice (screw Eddie, he could totally sing), "If you got a hunger for what you see, you'll take it eventually/You can have anything you want, but you better not take it from me."

He didn't really know what the words meant, but he thought that he almost did; and that seemed like enough.

But then Stan was turning to face him, and Richie felt young and stupid all over again, because Stan's eyes were like searchlights, finding secrets in Richie that he himself did not yet know. It made Richie feel a bit shaken, and he rolled over to focus ferociously on his own comic book.

After that day, he mostly hung out with Stuttering Bill. Bill laughed at Richie's jokes and rarely scolded him. He didn't have to extra-special deepclean his room for Bill like he did for Stan, either, making sure everything was orderly to keep him from twitching. And Bill didn't make him feel *strange* with a humming, buzzing energy just under the surface of everything.

Seventh grade, and Henry Bowers was back with a vengeance. He'd been held back yet again- he missed an awful lot of school, after all, and when he did come, he was always covered in bruises.

"His dad beats him," Eddie said quietly. It was just one of those Derry things everybody knew and nobody talked about. Even Eddie looked ashamed after he'd spoken the words, as though afraid of their forbiddenness departing his lips.

Beaten or not, Henry was never too worn down to give the Losers hell... and this time, he had company. He'd acquired his own crew of thuggish big kids with the same propensity for violence as his (more, even: at the sight of blood, Hockstetter's dead eyes would grow shiny,

his breathing; labored. He leaned against Henry's shoulder like a devil and watched the events unfurl.)

Stanley knew to avoid them but Richie- oh *Richie*. His mouth was going to get him killed some day, Stan just knew it. He'd jeer and mock them, then turn tail and run when an insult managed to resound in old Henry's brain...

... Like it was after school That Day.

The whirlwind of stampeding feet behind Stanley had him spinning around at his open locker, a hand flying to his mouth. Richie, nose bloodied, reached him first and, before he could contemplate whether this was a good idea or not, grabbed Stan's hand in his, dragging him along behind as he'd done when they were small.

Stanley dropped his schoolbooks and ran, because anything that chased Richie always ended up chasing him, too. Distant footsteps and shouts followed them.

They darted up the stairs of Derry Junior and High School (one building; the town wasn't *that* big yet) and into the nearest dark, empty classroom, smelling of cleaning chemicals with all the chairs stacked on the desks from a recent vacuuming.

"Under the desk!" Stan hissed, pushing first Richie under the teacher's desk where the chair normally went, then crawling in himself, protectively putting his own body in front (Richie had already been punched; he didn't know how badly.)

The footsteps and voices approached, quieted, stalled. The classroom door creaked open again. Preemptively, Stan hooked an arm around Richie's neck and clapped a hand firmly over his mouth. It'd be just like Richie to get them both beaten up by saying something smart now.

He felt Richie's breath through his bruised and bleeding nose wafting hotly over his cheek and his fingers. Richie's heartbeat was thundering in his ear, racing almost as fast as his own, as the myriad of footsteps entered the classroom. His body was overly warm; it always was. When everyone else bundled up in jackets, Richie

valiently kept on with his shorts and ugly Hawaiian shirts. This proximity made Stan feel a bit sweaty. The pins holding the yarmulke his mother was so much more adamant that he wear all the time now ("You're going to be a man soon, Stanley!") had slipped, and the crocheted fabric fell over his eyes. He pushed it back.

"They ain't *here*, Henry," whined Victor Criss, so close and so unexpectedly that they both jumped, knocking heads. "The Trashmouth and that Jewfag boyfriend of his. They must have gone on to the gym."

Henry swore, soft and contemplating. "He'll pay for what he said to me," he decided, sure and promising as an oath. "He will."

The door closed, and the boys were alone once more in the classroom. They waited several long minutes, then Richie was tapping at Stan's wrist and Stan quickly snatched his hand away from Richie's face.

"The hell did you *say* to him?!" he demanded.

Richie winced. "I may have... implied that he and Patrick are bumping uglies--"

Stan hissed sharply between his teeth, but that wasn't all.

"- because he reminded him so much of his father."

"Oh, for the love of Oscar Wilde." Stan rubbed the bridge of his nose, feeling the beginnings of a headache thrum there. "Do you have a death wish?!"

"He was picking on Eddie! - Who is now *fine*, by the way, thanks to me."

Stan grunted as he leaned his back against the desk. It was surprisingly comfortable under here, with Richie's excessive body heat luring him into an almost sleepy state. "It's your funeral, I guess."

"I put the 'fun' in 'funeral', baby."

Stan gave Richie a funny look. He was talking thickly through his

busted- hopefully not broken- nose. At least it'd stopped bleeding. The red drying tacky on his upper lip was starting to flake.

He reached and cupped Richie's chin in hand, used his thumb to brush away the flakes of blood to better inspect the damage. "He walloped you good," he mused quietly, relieved when he could again see Richie's freckles under the smears.

Richie was watching him with his coffee-colored eyes, an unusual warmth in them that was usually drowned out by a glint of wicked humor. Stan felt the humming between them- that humming that never really went away, only faded in and out sometimes like a bad radio signal- stronger than ever. It was like standing with his hands above a beehive, wondering whether one would sting.

"At least they didn't bust my glasses again," Richie whispered, and his voice had gone hoarse. At the 'B' of 'bust,' his pursed lips brushed Stan's thumb, deceptively soft and plush. It was so much more than a beesting; it was a jolt of lightening.

"Come on," Stanley said, hurriedly crawling out from under the desk and turning his back on Richie in his haste to get to the door. If lightening struck twice, he doubted his heart could take it. "Lets see how badly they murdered my textbooks."

Eighth grade was their final year, though none of them knew it at the time.

(Perhaps a part of them did know. It did feel like things were *happening*, and fast... the sort of things that meant nothing would ever be the same.)

There were new Losers now: The boy with the books and the knowledge; the girl with the flames in her hair and the punches in her laugh; the man-to-be who could build *anything*. And how they loved them, as though they'd known them all along. And maybe their destiny was preordained for them, and maybe it wasn't fair-

- but for those all-too-few weeks, they had each other. One great force divided among seven young bodies, connected by lines of blood

through each palm. Richie was a little in love with all of them; their strength and their wildness and their power they couldn't entirely explain. *Lucky sevens.*

He was a *lot* in love with *one* of them, though, and too much had changed for him to continue ignoring it. There were far, far worse things in the world than boys who sometimes wanted to kiss boys.

The humming was near-constant now, whenever they were together: an electric current that surely all the Losers felt, sparking and spitting and maybe a little dangerous. (It's awful hard to hide your feelings from six people who have seen your soul... who might just be your honest-to-Maturin soul-mates.)

"W-w-would you just *q-quit* it already?!" Bill asked as they bent over Ben's blowtorch, forging solid-silver slugs that may or may not save their lives. "Yuh-you're making us all cuh-crazy." (Richie didn't have to ask what he meant. And gauging by the pink dusting Stan's cheeks, he didn't either. The humming was particularly bad that day, because Stan's curls were in crazy disarray and Richie's stretched t-shirt showed more collarbone than was accustomed.)

He was one to talk. There were no beestings between he, Ben, and Beverly: theirs was a molten shift of tectonic plates, rumbling through the group and erupting earthquakes in their chests. Richie was half-tempted to grab Bev and kiss her himself, just to end the tension, were he not fully aware that she'd slug him in the jaw for trying.

Mike was looking at him, too, with his kindly knowing eyes. Even Ben glanced up from his work, the thick protective sunglasses reflecting Richie's own pale face back at him. *Just say it, dude. Just say it, you big chicken.*

Richie let out a shuddery breath and turned to face his oldest friend, who was looking fixedly at his shoes.

"Stan-the-man," Richie began, and his voice cracked- actually cracked, like the pubescent dweeb that he was. He cleared his throat, shuffled uncomfortably. This should not be this difficult. Maybe if he spoke in one of his voices (Southern Gentleman wouldn't be so

sheepish in a declaration!) - "Ah say, ah say, Stanleh, what with the economy being what it is, and the birds with the bees, that it's high time to make an honest man out of!"

"Richie, what are you talking about?" Stan had lost his bashful blush and was now only looking at him with his customary exasperation and affection. Richie melted a little, and not from the heat of Bill's garage. Then squirmed. Then stood tall and stepped from the safety of the sidewalk and onto the road.

"Stanley... I think I've been in love with you for as long as I can remember," Richie admitted meekly in his own voice, and then tightly closed his eyes, waiting for a colliding truck to knock him out of the world.

"Richie." There was a shuffling of footsteps as Stan approached. God; he was going to laugh in Richie's face. Or worse- he'd feel awkward and say nothing; clam up in typical Stan fashion.

Hands took Richie's cheeks, and he dared open his eyes to see those steady caramel-apple eyes burn into his. He gulped, even as his heart stuttered. "Richie Tozier, you might just be the biggest idiot I've ever met." He was so close Richie could have counted his golden lashes curling Cherubically long, brushing his cheeks as he blinked.

"Yeah?" Richie asked, hoarse and whispery. So Stan kissed him. It was a little like getting hit by a truck, after all- but Stan's hand was curled firmly in his, and so Richie wasn't afraid.

"Finally," Eddie murmured, behind their backs.

"No kidding," Bev snorted.

"Shh!" Mike chastised.

Richie felt Stan's face grow hot from embarrassment against his even before he pulled away and opened his eyes, so he laughed-breathlessly, chapped lips a little damp- and threw his arm around his best friend's shoulders.

"Are we gonna go kill that fucking clown or what?" he asked his Losers, speaking loudly to be heard over his own thundering heart.

"Pip-pip and tally-ho, my good fellows! The hour grows late!"

Stan didn't let go of his hand once for the rest of the evening. Richie had never been happier.

Twenty-Seven Years Later

He second, triple, and quadruple-guessed himself as he walked up the lawn of the lovely Georgia home, up the porch and past the two creaking rocking chairs, and onto the faded 'Welcome' doormat. This was a terrible idea. At best, he'd scratch open barely-closed wounds and make her cry; at worst, she'd slam the door in his face.

Still, though- he'd come all this way, and he had Mike's photo-album held tightly to his chest. If he didn't do this now, soon he'd have forgotten too much to do anything. He raised his fist and knocked on the door.

It took a while for her to answer, but the moment she did, his heart sighed, relaxed. This was Right. *She* was Right.

She was tall and thin, gracefully entering her forties, with thick, practically-cut brown hair to match her doe's eyes. Her face was freckled, and because of her sleeveless salmon-colored blouse, Richie could see the freckles extended down her arms and over her upper chest, as well. She looked like a person Stanley Uris could fall in love with.

"Patricia Uris?" he greeted softly, eyes drawn to her left hand, where two wedding bands still waited: a plain gold man's ring and a daintier band topped with a little diamond and two flakes of garnet. It matched the gently gleaming Magan David that hung on a slim chain between her collarbones.

"Yes?" She regarded him warily. He knew he had a bit of a roguish, disreputable look; in his line of business, interviewing rock-stars and spinning records, that was sort of a plus, but he knew he was out of place in this nice suburban neighborhood with its hydrangea bushes and white picket fences.

"Ma'am, my name is Richard Tozier. I recently heard news of your husband's passing—" his voice wobbled, but did not break. He cleared his throat to fortify himself. "And I... He was one of my best childhood friends. I brought with me some photographs of us as kids, and wondered if you might like to see—"

He held the book open for her to see the photocopies of black-and-white images he'd scanned from Mike's stash; group photos of all the Losers, pictures of Stan on his own, lying on his back and looking at the sky; a photograph of Stan with Richie's arms thrown around his neck—

Patricia made a small sound, her hand rising to cover her mouth, Stan's oversized ring slipping back down her small finger, and Richie cringed. Oh, he'd hurt the widow after all; he hadn't *meant* to, he'd only just—

"Wait here," she said, and stepped back into the house. Unsure what else to do, Richie waited.

She returned a moment later with shoes and a jacket on, and stepped outside to sit on one of the porch rocking chairs. "Please," she said. "Sit."

He sat in the spare chair (*Stan's chair*) and held the album on his lap. He didn't comment on the box of tissues she set between them, and she said nothing when he took a few for himself.

They talked for hours—new memories and old—and when she said softly, "You loved him, didn't you Richard?" he could only reply, "I did. And I do. And I always will."

(In the quiet space of dreams, where forgotten memories wait.)

"Me, too."

The teacher and the DJ—Stanley's last love and his first—sat in front of the house in which he'd built and then taken his life, to mourn and to comfort. A third party might have noticed the similar way their eyes lit up when they smiled, or a near-identical set to their lips when they became lost in memory, but in one another they found kindred

spirits. And when dusk fell and it was time for Richie to climb back into his candy-red Camaro and take the long road home to California, they parted as friends.

"Thank you, Richie," Patricia said, and embraced him, the photo album now clutched in her hand. "This was a comfort."

"Thank you, Patty. It was wonderful to meet you."

Somewhere, beyond galaxies and turtles and gods that destroy and gods that create, something that had once been Stan Uris, who gave a gentle (exasperated, affectionate) smile.